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ENGLISH ALABASTERS

1968

English Alabaster Carvings

1325-1550

Alabaster came into general use as a medium for sculpture about 1325, and during the 14th and 15th centuries the carving of alabaster developed into a major industry. The carvings were usually in the form of panels, often referred to as tables, and were used for devotional purposes in the church or in the home. The carving of these panels came to an end with the Reformation although alabaster continued to be used in the production of tomb monuments.

The main medieval quarries were situated in the ridge south-west of Tutbury in Staffordshire, 20 miles from Nottingham, and at Chellaston Hill 4 miles south-east of Derby. When first quarried alabaster is soft and easily cut but hardens on exposure to air and is then capable of being polished like marble. It is also well suited for the application of gilding and colouring. After being quarried the stone would be transported to the main alabaster centres of Nottingham, York and London. In the workshops the design would first be drawn on the stone and the surround cut away to form the relief. The craftsman would often be responsible for both the carving and the painting, although in the larger workshops a division of labour may have taken place. There are instances of some work being done after erection, as for example on a large altar-piece by Peter the Mason which was transported to Windsor and then painted by a William Burdon in 1369.

A certain number of the panels produced were designed to stand or hang alone while others were intended for the decoration of private tombs. The vast majority, however, were arranged in a series of five or seven to be seen either on or behind the altar. The central panel was larger, representing the Trinity or the Crucifixion, and the other panels usually depicted a saint. The whole series was devoted to illustrating a particular theme such as the Passion, the Life of the Virgin and Martyrdoms. The carved panels were placed within a large wooden framework designed as a hinged tryptych so that the end sections could be folded over. This was to protect the images from damage and also to follow the custom of covering all forms of decoration during Lent. The panels were secured to their wooden frame by latten wires leaded into the reverse of the stone.

Towards the end of the 15th century altarpieces became elaborate erections made up of two tiers of panels and figures. The panels continued to be housed in a wooden framework, which because of its great weight was often attached to the wall behind the altar. Two examples of the double tiered altarpiece survive in France, at La Celle and Compiegne. It was during this period that the panels became hollowed away at their base to facilitate lifting from the surfaces.

English Alabasters became popular on the continent and many were exported after 1400. Due to this trade and the course of the Reformation, this particular field of English Medieval Art came to be well represented in other European countries, including Scandinavia and Iceland.

CATALOGUE

1 THE ANNUNCIATION

The Virgin is seated on the right with her left hand holding a book. Gabriel top left raises his right hand. Beneath the angel is a lily in a ewer. A fine low relief carving with little or no colour.
Late 14th Century 17 × 11¾ in.
Madrid; London; Hildburgh Collection

2 THE CRUCIFIXION

Three Angels receive blood from the wound of Christ. A centurion holds a scroll in left hand bearing inscription IHS NAZARENUS REX IUDEORUM FILIUS DEI VERI. The Virgin is supported by one of the Maries and St John. The edges of the panel are chamfered. Coloured green ground.
14th Century 16¼ × 11½ in.
Nelson Collection; Hildburgh Collection

3 THE ASCENSION

The lower part of Christ's robe appears top centre. The Virgin and St John, holding a palm, are with the remaining apostles beneath. A very fine low relief with chamfered edges and slight traces of gilding and colouring.
Late 14th Century 16¼ × 11¾ in.
Naworth Castle Cumberland—fixed to the wall. Hildburgh Collection

4 THE CORONATION OF THE VIRGIN

The Virgin seated on the left receives either the crown or the blessing from Christ seated on the right. The relief is embattled and the gilt background is ornamented with gesso knobs. Some gilding on the figures.
C.1400 17¼ × 11¾ in.
Hillingford Collection; Nelson Collection, Hildburgh Collection

5 THE ENTOMBMENT

Christ is being lowered by Joseph of Arimathea while St Mary Magdalene stands with her hair staunching the blood. An ointment pot is beside her. Green and flowered ground.
C.1400 14⅞ × 11½ in.
P. Biver Collection; Nelson Collection; Hildburgh Collection

6 THE RESURRECTION

Christ is stepping from the tomb holding either a cross or staff. A sleeping soldier follows the line of the tomb while another is asleep on the right. A third expresses fear on the left. The diagonal perspective of the tomb is a strong compositional device and is often used c.f. The Entombment. Green and flowered ground with typical embattling on the top. A very fine alabaster carving on a typical format of this subject.
Early 15th Century 17 × 11 in.
P. Biver Collection; Nelson Collection; Hildburgh Collection.

7 CHRIST'S ENTRY INTO JERUSALEM

Christ seated on an ass is followed by three disciples carrying books. A youth spreads a garment on the ground and [illegible] in the foreground. The feet in the tree are the [illegible] which lies [illegible] No colour.
15th Century 14 × 10¼ in.
Acquired by Dr. Hildburgh in Paris.

8 CROWNING WITH THORNS

Christ seated with bound hands is surrounded by torturers. Two press down on the crown with a rod while above another prepares to strike. In the bottom left corner a stooping torturer places a reed in Christ's hand. Above the green and flowered ground a section of the relief is painted to represent a wall. The torturers have darkened faces. Such a theme as the Crowning is not often depicted in English alabaster carvings. On the reverse of the panel the number VIIII indicates its position on the altarpiece, probably one of nine panels. The exceptional size of the panel shows that the retable was a particularly large one. A Crucifixion would have occupied the centre position.
15th Century 23⅜ × 11¼ in.
France; Nelson Collection; Hildburgh Collection.

9 THE AGONY IN THE GARDEN

Christ is kneeling on the left with trees and palings in the background suggesting the garden. A chalice stands on a projecting eminence. Three apostles seated and asleep. Green and flowered ground with green colouring on the trees.
15th Century 16¼ × 10⅜ in.
Acquired by Dr. Hildburgh in London.

10 ST JAMES THE LESS

Large alabaster figure holding a fuller's club and a scroll, on which was painted a sentence of the Creed. It appears to have belonged to a series of twelve apostles which were rescued in 1566 from the iconoclasts to become part of the choir screen in a church at Hoogstraeten (prov. of Antwerp). No colour remains.
15th Century height 30 in.
Brussels; Hildburgh Collection.

11 ST PETER

The Saint holds two keys and a book. A gilt background with gesso knobs now missing. Gilding and some colour on the figure. Embattled top. The figure would have occupied the end position of a retable.
C.1400 17 × 6 in.
Nelson Collection; Hildburgh Collection.

12 ST PAUL

The Saint holds a book and a sword. A gilt background with gesso knobs now missing. Gilding and some colour on the figure. Embattled top. Possibly from the same retable as St Peter.
C.1400 17 × 6 in.
Capt. Mankes Collection; Nelson Collection; Hildburgh Collection.

13 ST SEBASTIAN

The Saint's body is pierced with arrow holes, the arms are bound behind his back. The top is roughly cusped. Green and flowered ground. The panel has either weathered or been stained brown.
15th Century 16¼ × 5¾ in.
Brussels; Hildburgh Collection.

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14 THE HEAD OF ST JOHN THE BAPTIST

The dish bears the inscription CAPUT SCI IHOHANIS BAPTISTE. I DISCO. Below, the Virgin and Child; left, St Peter; right, St Thomas a Becket; bottom right, St Catherine with a wheel and sword. The soul of the Baptist is supported in a napkin at the top of the panel. A fine example with very good colouring of a subject which became a speciality of the Nottingham carvers.
15th Century 10¼ × 8 in.
Scarisbrick Hall Lancs.; Nelson Collection; Hildburgh Collection.

15 THE HEAD OF ST JOHN THE BAPTIST

St John's head is flanked by St Peter on the left and St Thomas a Becket on the right. Christ stands on the tomb below. The soul is supported in a napkin. Embattled canopy with four turrets. Some colouring and gilding on the head and figures.
15th Century 12¼ × 6¾ in.
Caldicott Collection Hastings; Nelson Collection; Hildburgh Collection.

16 THE DEPOSITION

Christ being lowered by St Joseph of Arimathea, left, and St John on a a ladder, right. A dwarfish Nicodemus removes the nails from Christ's feet. The Virgin stands on the left with crossed hands. Practically no traces of colour. Marked VI on the reverse of the panel. A fine example both in carving and composition.
15th Century 16 × 11¼ in.
Acquired by Dr. Hildburgh in Paris.

17 THE THREE MARIES AT THE SEPULCHRE

The three women carrying christmatories stand behind the open tomb. One assists an angel to hold up the shroud. Another angel kneels in front. Two conventional Easter palms in the foreground. Some colouring remains on the panel.
15th Century 20¾ × 11¼ in.
Acquired by Dr. Hildburgh in Paris 1950.

THE SWANSEA ALTARPIECE—PHOTOGRAPH

This is the only example in Great Britain of the smaller single tiered altarpiece arranged in the hinged tryptych form. From left to right the carvings represent St John the Baptist, the Annunciation, the Nativity, the Holy Trinity, the Ascension, the Assumption of the Virgin and St John the Evangalist. Each carving has an elaborate alabaster canopy and the whole retains its original painted wood framework.
1450–1500 33 × 84 in.
Munich; Acquired from Lord Swansea's Collection 1919.

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